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St. Louis, MO - Local congressmen and the leaders of the House Veterans Affairs Committee blasted the Veterans Affairs Department for continuing problems at VA Medical Centers including the John Cochran facility in St. Louis. The committee held a field hearing Tuesday at the Eagleton Courthouse in downtown St. Louis.

Some 18-hundred veterans were notified last month that a failure to adequately clean dental equipment from early 2009 to March of 2010 put them at risk of contracting hepatitis or HIV. They have been offered free testing by the VA. But Committee Chairman Rep. Bob Filner (D) California demanded VA officials explain why it took nearly four months to notify the veterans that they and their families might be at risk. Under Secretary for Health Dr. Robert Petzel admitted the effort had been "unacceptable." "We are shocked, appalled by this unacceptable incident and I am personally embarrassed by the time it took the organization to respond."

Petzel promised he would have a rapid response procedure for future medical concerns ready in a month. Chairman Filner interrupted telling him, "Why not right now?"

Veterans Terri Odom and Susan Maddux both spoke of problems with the John Cochran VA Medical Center on Grand in addition to the current dental clinic worries. Ms Odom complained about rusty looking dental molds used when she had false teeth made, a moldy, unsanitary shower in her hospital room and what appeared to be unclean equipment ready for use in a colonoscopy. Ms Maddux described a relapse following brain surgery caused by bacteria normally found in the intestine. She said the John Cochran facility was dirty and the clerks very rude. Both women praised most of their doctors and nurses, but complained about the tone of the letter sent to notify them about the dental clinic lapse.

Congressman John Shimkus (R) Collinsville said the problems may be system wide. He spoke of nine veterans who died after inadequate medical treatment at a VA facility in Marion, IL. Both he and Democratic Congressman Jerry Costello from Belleville want to know if anyone at the facilities will be fired. They complained the head of the Marion facility was merely shuffled off to another location.

Former sterilization technician Earlene Johnson testified she tried to warn her supervisors that improvements and changes in procedures needed to be made in the Sterilization Processing department. But she was fired before she completed 12 months on the job. Johnson, who says she had managed similar departments in private hospitals in other cities, complained the supervisors were not professional.

Petzel promised there would be a new procedure so workers and patients could freely point out problems.

Congressman Russ Carnahan (D) St. Louis has led the effort to investigate the problems. He asked for the hearing by the Veterans Affairs Committee. Congressman Lacy Clay (D) St. Louis is asking for another investigation by another House committee.

The chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee promised to return to St. Louis in six months to check up on the hospital.

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